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ABSTRACT

During the first half of the 1980s, the focus of the literacy movement was on strengthening literacy programs through the recruitment of volunteers. Although these early efforts are continuing, the focus in adult literacy has changed. Job-related or workplace literacy has become a national priority, and the impact of adult illiteracy on private industry is becoming increasingly visible. Demographic factors and changes in jobs are also creating a need for workplace literacy programs. Workplace literacy and general literacy differ in purpose. A number of recent studies have examined the literacy skills that individuals need in order to succeed in the workplace. These studies have resulted in the publication of a number of lists of work-related reading, writing, speaking, listening, mathematics, scientific, and reasoning skills. Industry-based literacy approaches can be divided into two groups: (1) pre-1980, viewed primarily as traditional benefits for the employee, and (2) post-1980, viewed primarily as instruments for achieving the company's advanced technology goals. Unlike traditional literacy programs, which were generally initiated in an era of company prosperity and security, the new literacy skills programs were initiated in an era of foreign competition and rapid technological change in response to the realization that many employees lacked the basic skills with which to acquire more technical skills. Most industry-based literacy training occurs on the company site, partly for the sake of employee convenience and partly because many employees find schoolroom environments inhibiting. Several guides to developing workplace literacy programs have been published, and four of these are briefly described. A list of 12 references is also provided. (MN)

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WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAMS

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAMS

Increasing the literacy rate of adult Americans has been the focus of national attention during the 1980s. Following President Reagan's announcement of the Adult Literacy Initiative in September 1983, many new groups and organizations joined those who had long been involved in efforts to reduce adult illiteracy. During the first part of the decade, the focus was on strengthening literacy education programs through the recruitment of volunteers. The Coalition for Literacy, in conjunction with the American Association of Advertising Agencies, developed and operated a national public service advertising campaign designed to recruit volunteers to teach adults to read. The Business Council for Effective Literacy, formed by Harold W. McGraw early in 1984, encouraged businesses to support adult literacy programs in their local communities. Many communities and several states developed coalitions to facilitate communication and collaboration among literacy education providers. Although these early efforts are continuing, the focus in adult literacy education has changed during the latter part of the decade. Job-related or workplace literacy has become a national priority. This **Digest** examines workplace literacy including the need for it, how it differs from general literacy, literacy skills needed for the workplace, patterns in practices and approaches, and resources for program development.

The Need for Workplace Literacy Programs

The impact of adult illiteracy on private industry is increasingly visible. Historically, the severity of the adult illiteracy problem was obscured by adequate employment for adults with little or no literacy skills, simpler definitions of literacy, faulty survey methods, and a stigma that kept (and still keeps) many people from admitting illiteracy or seeking help. Now, however, business and industry face a growing awareness of the extent—and costs—of illiteracy in the work force, as increasing technological advances and foreign competition raise workers' basic skill requirements. As a result, companies are finding that many more employees are functionally illiterate than those who fit former stereotyped notions (Fields, Hull, and Sechler 1987).

Demographic factors and changes in jobs are also creating a need for workplace literacy programs. Bureau of Labor Statistics'projections of labor force growth to the year 2000 suggest that there will be "sharply slower growth in the labor force, particularly among younger workers . . . [and] that the people who will be entering the labor force in the years ahead may not have the skills that employers need" (Riche 1988, p. 34). According to the report *Workforce 2000* (Johnston 1987), new jobs in the service industries—where most of the job growth is projected to occur—will demand much higher skill levels than the jobs of today. Very few new jobs will be created for those who cannot read, follow directions, and use mathematics. Thus, new entrants as well as established workers will need literacy training in order for companies to remain productive and competitive.

Workplace Literacy versus General Literacy

Workplace literacy and general literacy differ in purpose (Mathes 1987). In order to enter and thrive in the work force, individuals must possess certain basic literacy skills. The literacy skills needed to perform work successfully are commonly referred to as job-related or workplace literacy skills. Most employers are interested in a range of skills beyond the traditional 3 Rs because today's workplace requires not only the ability to read, write, and compute, but also the ability to use these skills in problem solving (Gainer 1988; Sticht and Mikulecky 1984). In studies of workplace literacy training, Mikulecky and others (1987) found that the types of reading and writing on the job differ considerably from the literacy activities of students in schools. They also noted that the majority of reading and writing activities in which adults engage is job-related. The following two factors are important in understanding the nature of workplace literacy: (1) the time spent in reading and writing averages two hours per day and (2) the difficulty level of the materials is high, ranging from 10th- to 12th-grade level or higher (ibid.).

Workplace Literacy Requirements

What are the literacy or basic skills individuals need in order to succeed in the workplace? A number of recent studies have investigated this question and developed lists of skills. In 1983 the Center for Public Resources formulated a basic skills list that identified job-related basic competencies in the following areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, scientific, and reasoning (Henry and Raymond 1983).

Researchers at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education compiled a list of skills needed by employees to enter and progress on the job. The list, which was verified by company and union trainers, consisted of the following skill categories: mathematics, reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Hull and Sechler 1987). Some skills on the list (e.g., "completes forms and applications") were only considered necessary for entering the job whereas others (e.g., "estimates areas or values") were listed as skills needed to progress in the workplace. Several skills (e.g., "handwriting is legible," "signs forms appropriately," and "speaks face to face") were considered necessary for both entering and progressing on the job.

As a part of its project "Best Practices: What Works in Training and Development," the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) is studying basic skill requirements of the workplace. By focusing on the question "What are the skills employers want?," ASTD (Gainer 1988) has developed the following four categories of skills: (1) individual competence including communication, comprehension, computation, and culture; (2) personal reliability including personal management, ethics, and vocabulary maturity; (3) economic adaptability including problem solving, learning, employability, and

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career development; and (4) group and organizational effectiveness including interpersonal skills, organizational skills, negotiation skills, creativity, and leadership. According to Gainer (ibid.), the first three categories of skills "focus on individual development—the set of skills *people* need to be able to make successful transitions into and within the workplace. . . . But [the fourth category consists of] essentials from the *employer* perspective" (p. 6). When compared to the lists developed by Henry and Raymond (1983) and Hull and Sechler (1987), the ASTD list reflects the fact that the range of skills needed by workers is expanding.

Patterns in Practices and Approaches

Because of their diversity, workplace literacy programs are difficult to characterize. However, seven case studies based on visits to industry-based programs by researchers at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education revealed the following general patterns in the establishment and operation of workplace literacy programs:

- Industry-based literacy approaches can be divided into two groups: (1) pre-1980, viewed primarily as traditional benefits for the employee, and (2) post-1980, viewed primarily as instruments for achieving the company's advanced technology goals.
- Traditional programs were generally initiated in an era of company prosperity and security; new literacy skills programs were initiated during an era of foreign competition and rapid technological change.
- In some cases, new basic skills programs were initiated after it was discovered that employees lacked the basic skills with which to acquire more technical skills.
- Diplomas or their equivalents are rapidly becoming the new standard entry-level requirement for industry.
- Program evaluation tended to be informal and based on feedback from instructor, employee, and supervisor.
- Most industry-based literacy training occurs on the company site, partly for employee convenience, and partly because many employees find schoolroom environments inhibiting. (Fields, Hull, and Sechler 1987, pp. 40-41).

Resources for Program Development

Because of the interest in workplace literacy programs, a number of publications that can be used to guide program development are beginning to appear in the literature. The following items will serve as helpful resources for those seeking more information on this aspect of workplace literacy.

- *Adult Literacy: Industry-Based Training* (Fields, Hull, and Sechler 1987) contains seven case studies of industry-based literacy programs. A series of recommendations to help training planners and instructors meet the expanding need for workplace literacy programs is included.
- *Job-Related Basic Skills. A Guide for Planners of Employee Programs* (Business Council for Effective Literacy 1987) is a step-by-step guide to planning and implementing an effective job-related employee basic skills program. Part one provides general principles to guide the effort. Part two discusses 12 basic steps to take in deciding on the purpose and content of a basic skills program, implementing it, and ensuring its effectiveness. Part three considers some special issues related to program development. Fourteen illustrative cases are provided throughout the guide.
- *Guidelines for Developing an Educational Program for Worker Literacy* (Massachusetts State Executive Department 1987) contains guidelines developed to assist Massachusetts Private Industry Councils, social agencies, unions, businesses, and education providers in designing literacy programs appropriate to the workplace. The bulk of the paper provides suggestions for program development.
- *Let ABE Do It. Basic Education in the Workplace* (Mark 1987) lists business, industry, union, and Job Training Partnership Act-supported efforts to provide public and private employees, as well as some prospective employees, with the basic literacy skills they need to perform in the workplace. Information given for each program includes title, provider, address, contact person, telephone number, and description of program.

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